

Examine the ways in which Shakespeare presents and uses revenge in *Hamlet*

The play 'Hamlet' conforms to the typical ingredients that make up a revenge tragedy of the Elizabethan era. It conforms to certain guidelines and similar features, these are; a hesitating avenger, a villain who is to be killed in revenge, complex twisted plots, sexual obsessions, treachery, a play within a play, lust and greed which are the motives for the revenge, a ghost who calls for revenge, real or false madness and the consequently the death of the avenger.

Tragedies date back from around 4000BC in the Middle East as totemic rituals. People of that era believed if they acted out whatever concerned them, it would not come true in real life. This is still true to this day and can be seen in 'Hamlet' by the way the audience enjoys tragedy and revenge providing a catharsis. You get a second hand experience, and you can experience the emotion without going through it yourself.

There are also five parts to the structure of a revenge tragedy; the exposition by the ghost, this is then followed by anticipation in which the avenger usually in a series of soliloquies reveals the details of the planned revenge, confrontation between the avenger and the intended victim, then delay in which the avenger has mixed feelings about the task in hand. Finally the death of both the intended victim and usually also the avenger. Although Hamlet does conform to this, I do not think Hamlet is a revenge play but more a play about revenge.

There are four revenge plots in Hamlet the most substantial one being Hamlet's vengeance on Claudius who murdered king Hamlet. While old Hamlet was sleeping in his orchard Claudius poured poison in his ear. It was announced in court that Hamlet had died from a poisonous snakebite. Claudius' main motive for killing his brother is he wants to become him. Claudius wanted to be king, marry Gertrude and stop Hamlet from being king. We knew Claudius killed old Hamlet in the beginning of the play but we suppress our knowledge in order to engage in the development of the story. Shakespeare encourages this by involving the audience in Hamlet's struggle to accept his mother's incestuous marriage, the mourning of his father and his relationship with Ophelia.

The Christian church insisted that vengeance was God's business not man's. Revenge was both a mortal sin and a sin by law. Hamlet is in two minds, he knows that revenge is wrong but he knows he must avenge his father's death, as there is no law to give him justice. Although they did believe in divine justice, God will decide his fate when he dies. Revenge is always in excess of justice. In these circumstances revenge raises both political and moral issues and in order for the revengers to uphold the law they are compelled to break it. The play condemns revenge but Hamlet stays within orthodoxy, he revenges with a conscience and in order to reinstate normality in the state of Denmark.

The ghost of old Hamlet tells Hamlet he must fulfil the act of revenge on Claudius. Old Hamlet died before he has a chance to repent his sins so his soul is suffering in purgatory and only when the revenge has taken place can his soul rest.

Shakespeare sets the scene for the ghost's appearance within the first few lines. "Who's there?" from the first line we can get the feeling of tension and uncertainty in the scene. It is late at night and visibility is poor. The lines are very short and sharp; the audience can tell something is about to happen. Barnardo asks

Francisco if he has seen anything, “what has this thing appeared again tonight?” As the ghost appears Marcellus asks Horatio to talk to it, “Thou art a scholar, speak to it Horatio”

The Shakespearean audience would be very wary about the ghost. Some didn't believe in ghosts, while others believed that ghosts were the devil's messengers. So they would fully understand Hamlet's delay in carrying out the action. “This bodes some strange eruption to our state.” The ghost symbolises the start of Denmark's problems, its appearance is an omen.

It has been said by psychologists studying revenge that ‘Hamlet cannot bear to kill Claudius because the action would too closely resemble the wished for murder of his own father.’ (1).

Sigmund Freud believed that the myth Oedipus possessed an insight into the important stage in the psychological development of humans, although this theory has never been fully accepted. All sons go through a phase in their childhood where they desire to kill their fathers and marry their mothers. Hamlet may have passed through the Oedipal desires, but a crisis phase has surfaced his effectively repressed Oedipal desires. Guilty feelings move him to plan revenge on Claudius. “Nay but to live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed strewed in corruption, honeying, and making love over the nasty sty.” Hamlet's obsessions for his mother are resurfaced. Hamlet loves the power he gets from saying and agreeing he is going to kill his uncle but he doesn't go through with it. An explanation of why Hamlet delays the act of revenge is; Shakespeare has created a man that is suffering from ‘acute depressive illness’. This also includes obsession features, and inability to cope with the responsibility of revenging his father's death. In Elizabethan times this would have been looked upon as melancholy and a defect of Hamlet's character. Shakespeare presents Hamlet as an intellect; he uses strong comparisons between his father and Claudius, “Hyperion to a satyr”. This implies his father was like the sun god, whereas Claudius was a mere half goat half-man creature. The strong comparisons reveal his bitterness towards Claudius. (4)

Hamlet frequently expresses negative and pessimistic feelings. He feels inadequate and overwhelmed by the task in hand. “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite/That ever I was born to set it right”. Hamlet's second soliloquy particularly focuses on his delay for avenging his father's death, he begins” O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!” Hamlet expresses the disgust he has for himself for delaying his revenge, he speaks passionately as he is punishing himself.

Hamlet questions the ghost's honesty for the first time, “The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil, and the devil hath power”. Therefore Hamlet decides to “cath the conscience of the king,” by staging a re-enactment of the crime and asks Horatio to judge Claudius' response. Hamlet must find out if the ghost is being truthful so he pretends to be ‘mad’. “I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw”. He creates an antic disposition; by indirection he hopes to find directions out. Polonius also uses antic disposition in Act two, through Reynaldo Polonius' servant he hopes to observe Leartes behaviour in Paris. If you were mad it was easier to find out information, people would be less secretive when talking in your presence as you deemed not to be threat. Hamlet feels that if he acts mad then he does not have to keep his feelings pent up he can express the way he feels.

Shakespeare uses revenge to highlight how different characters deal with personal loss and tragedy. An example of this is young Fortinbras wanting to reclaim

the land his father lost to old Hamlet. He has got together a gang “sharked up” of lawless men to help in his battle.

Young Fortinbras is much like old Hamlet in the warrior- like approach he takes in avenging his father’s death. Hamlet wishes he could be more like his father. He procrastinates, he dithers he worries; he finds any excuse to put off the task in hand. He personifies himself throughout the play, “A dull and muddy-mettled rascal.” Hamlet is full of words and thoughts about revenge, but he shows no actions. He would love to be able to give the deed to someone else to do it for him. He is much like his uncle Claudius in this way, Claudius sends two of his ambassadors to talk to the king of Norway and reason with him about the warlike threats from young Fortinbras. “ Giving to you no further personal power to business with the king, more than the scope of these delated articles allow.” Claudius tells his ambassadors not to fight just reason. “ O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right”. Hamlet finds it ironic that fortune should bear him such malice that he has to be the person that has to kill Claudius. Both the king of Norway and the king of Denmark are not heirs to their throne; both have had a palace revolution.

Hamlet finds himself in the perfect situation to kill Claudius after the play scene. Claudius is kneeling down and Hamlet approaches him from and considers his vengeance. “ Now might I do it pat, now he is praying; and now I’ll do’t – and so he goes to heaven; and so am I revenged. That would be scanned: A villain kills my father, and for that, I his sole do this same villain send to heaven”. Hamlet decides not to kill Claudius whilst he is praying, as this wouldn’t be an appropriate vengeance, as Claudius would go to heaven. This is ironic as the king then says when Hamlet has left, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go.” “A brothers murder. Pray can I not”. Here Shakespeare is giving the audience an insight into the psychology of Claudius’ mind. Whether or not we are supposed to feel sympathy towards Claudius is doubtful but we do get to see him in a different perspective.

Hamlet refrains from killing because he thinks Claudius is praying, the irony is Claudius cannot relieve himself of his guilt in order to pray. Hamlet believes the king must be engaged in a sinful act before he can take revenge, “when he is drunk asleep, or in his rage/ or in th’incestuous pleasure of his bed”. Hamlets approach to revenge is completely different to the view Laertes has to revenge. Laertes is presented as a rash revenge hero and states that he would “cut his throat I’th’church!”.

Shakespeare presents Hamlet in a way that the audience can relate to his problems, we feel sorry for him and really want him to muster up the courage to go though with it and kill Claudius. He really wants to please his father and stop his soul suffering in purgatory. In Act 1 scene 5, we can really get a feel for Hamlet’s, desperation, “ O God!” Hamlet is open in his soliloquies to the audience; it is my belief that the only person Hamlet can really talk to about his problems is Hortatio and the audience.

Shakespeare provides his avenger with a conscience and Hamlet is aware of the consequences. It is with his anger of not being able to strike Claudius whilst he is supposedly praying that Hamlet goes in search of his mother to vent his aggression on her. “Frailty thy name is woman”, Hamlet feels that all the women in his life have betrayed him. Ophelia to her father, in agreeing not to see Hamlet again and his mother in giving in to marrying Claudius. He wishes they could be stronger and resist what they are told to do; it is because of this that he pushes them away from him.

The queen starts to rebuke Hamlet, but he will not accept what she says and points out that she has an illicit marriage. She is about to send for someone Hamlet

can talk to when Hamlet says he is going to show Gertrude her true self, “ You go not till I set you up a glass where you may see the innermost part of you.” Alarmed Gertrude cries for help and forgetting his silence Polonius cries out to. Hamlet hears Polonius shout and makes a pass through the arras, “ O I am slain.” Hamlet’s first question is, “Is it the king?” He blindly stabbed someone thinking it was Claudius hiding behind the arras. “ A bloody deed, almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king, and marry with his brother.” This is the first time Hamlet’s pent-up anger and frustration is being vented directly at one of the guilty parties and not at his own inadequacy. “ I took thee for thy better”. Up until this point Hamlet has not told his mother about Claudius killing his brother and how Hamlet wants to seek his revenge on him. Hamlet re allies himself with his mother and you get a sense that Hamlet has been relieved of a big burden.

“ This is the very coinage of your brain; this bodiless creation ecstasy is very cunning in.” Gertrude says that madness is good at creating ‘ghosts’ or ‘visions’. Hamlet replies by saying do not make yourself feel better by saying it is my madness and not your sin. “ O Hamlet thou hast cleft my heart in twain”. Hamlet understands there will be a price to pay for Claudius’s death, his own life. “ I do repent; but heaven hath pleased it so, to punish me with this, and this with me, that I must be their scourge and minister”. Gertrude finally accepts what Hamlet has told her and asks, “What shall I do?”

The end of the play without the prince is a very significant part of the play. Hamlet is in a position of power only until the message gets back to Claudius that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. When Claudius finds this out he knows he will have to kill Hamlet. The note that Hamlet was given from Claudius to give to England had the message to kill Hamlet. Hamlet read the message and changed it to the names Rozencrantz and Guildenstern. The king decides to form an alliance with Laertes and incites him to get revenge on Hamlet, for killing his father Polonius. Laertes says that he is going to do to Hamlet what Hamlet did to his father. “ I’m lost in it my lord. But let him come; it warms the very sickness in my heart, that I shall live and tell him to his teeth, ‘Thus didst thou’.” Claudius is entirely responsible for Polonius’ death, Claudius manipulates and corrupts Laertes taking advantage of his present state and so is deliberately presented as the villain. Laertes grief and anger has been intensified by the death of his Sister Ophelia due to her madness and the death of this father due to Hamlet.

Shakespeare presents Laertes as a rash revenge hero that adopts the Old Testament way of thinking, “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”, whereas Hamlet takes the view of the New Testament to “turn the other cheek”. This could be linked with the fact that Hamlet is Protestant and Laertes is Catholic so they have different religious views. Laertes’ revenge plot develops into a sub plot

Hamlet knows he will have to kill Claudius before he himself gets killed. “ It will be short; the interim is mine” Claudius knows that he can’t just have Hamlet stabbed, it would cause too much of an uproar as Hamlet is very popular in Elsinore. “Is the great love the general gender bear him”. He has to die in a duel and have a respectable death. Fencing was seen to be a very prestigious sport so it would be an ideal opportunity. Claudius must now make Laertes take revenge on Hamlet as his plot to have Hamlet killed in England has failed. He flatters Laertes and makes him feel helpless and eager to do his father justice by asking him, “Laertes was your father dear to you?”

The duel starts, Laertes is about to wound Hamlet with the poisoned foil but his conscience protests, “My lord, I’ll hit him now” [Aside] “ And yet’ tis almost against

my conscience". The king tells him to stop dallying. Shakespeare has created a high level of tension here. Laertes realises Claudius's true nature but can't back out of the agreement for fear of his own life. Gertrude drinks from the poisoned cup. How the self-righteous hypocrite loves to end the lives of others with poison. She drinks to the success of her son, though Claudius does protest, "Gertrude do not drink". Shakespeare effectively presents Claudius' cowardice and his lack of feelings towards his wife. It is clear Claudius would rather see his queen die than risk abandoning his plot.

Laertes' realises the plan has backfired and in killing Hamlet he has also assisted Claudius in killing Gertrude. Laertes stays alive long enough to gain the forgiveness from Hamlet, unlike Claudius who dies before he can be forgiven for his sins. In this way although the play has a gruesome and unhappy ending, the Elizabethan audience would appreciate the fact that Claudius will go to hell for his sins but Laertes' and Hamlet will not.

Revenge is presented by using a number of different sub plots of revenge, which can be compared to Hamlet's. Another son seeking revenge is Pyrrhus, when Troy was under siege by the Greeks; Pyrrhus went to avenge the death of Archillies his father. This is a parallel to the story of Hamlet, but Pyrrhus does kill his father's murderer Priam. Hamlet takes pleasure in telling the gruesome ways in which Pyrrhus killed Priam, wishing he could apply the story to Claudius' death. Although the story of Pyrrhus is similar to Hamlet's and can be seen as a parallel, Shakespeare has purposely created two people that differ in character. Hamlet at all times throughout the play is aware of his conscience. He battles with himself by over evaluating the situation. Every time he has an opportunity to kill Claudius he seems to conjure up a feeling of doubt and uncertainty as to why it is the wrong moment.

Hamlet has outlived most other revenge plays and is still immensely popular. The delay Hamlet shows before carrying out the act of revenge develops his character makes it easier for the audience to relate to him and makes him seem human. Shakespeare highlights the problems within a family through the use of revenge. Shakespeare's use of language and imagery gives us an insight into the psychology of the characters involved. He uses contrasts between the different characters, their sub plots and the ways in which they deal with their own personal revenge and ties it all into one big concluding scene.